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ABSTRACT

This report builds on information prepared for and presented at the June 2001 meeting of the National Alliance on the American High School (the Alliance). It focuses on one layer of the education system, state policy, which was selected for study because major changes in practice are hard to establish and even harder to sustain when state policies are inhospitable toward high school reform. State statutes and state board requirements affecting public high schools were studied, and data were gathered from a number of credible sources. The state policies reviewed fell into three clusters: (1) policies specific to high schools that deal with compulsory schooling ages, course credit, graduation, and diplomas; (2) policies to ensure opportunities to learn, which include those related to education financing, safe, non-violent schools, help for students who are falling behind, teacher certification requirements, and options beyond the regular comprehensive high school; and (3) policies surrounding standards, assessments, and accountability. The policies specific to high school carry some unpleasant messages about how relatively unchanged high schools have remained during the past two decades. Legislation relative to the high school curriculum and graduation suggests that findings of 20 years ago are still true. If students show up, can pass their courses, and do not cause trouble, they will graduate. The most significant difference is that today many students will also have to pass a state examination to receive a diploma. State policies keep the odds for students unbalanced, with clear tracks with different opportunities for different students. State leaders need to take a closer look at how their states have addressed high school education. (Contains 2 tables, 20 maps, 13 endnotes, and 28 references.) (SLD)

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NATIONAL ALLIANCE

ALL OVER THE MAP:

State Policies to Improve the High School

MONICA MARTINEZ

JUDY BRAY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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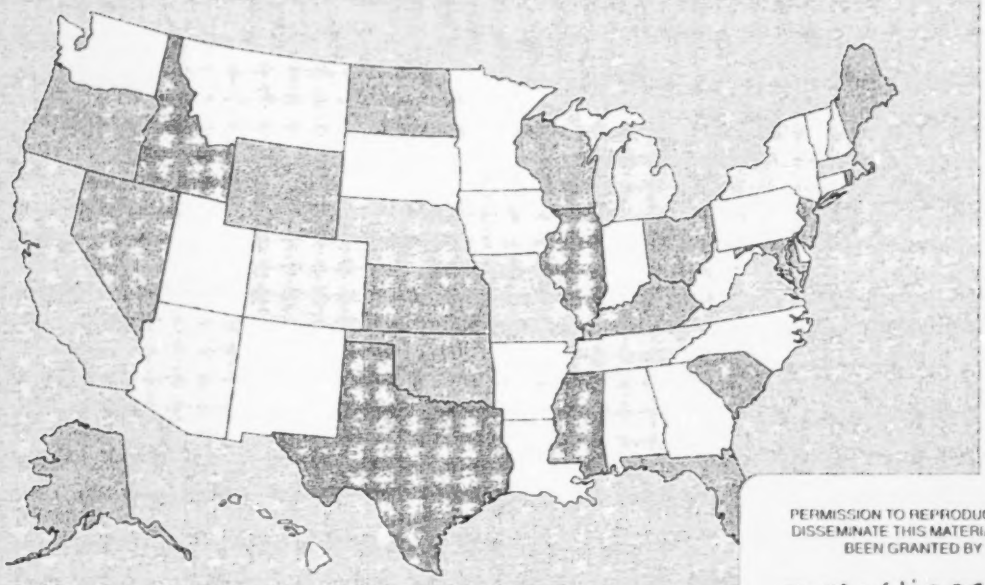

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The National Alliance on the American High School (HS Alliance) has grown from its initial meeting in 1999 of three organizations to a loose collaborative of 38 organizations to date committed to improving academic and developmental outcomes for high-school age youth. The National Alliance on the American High School envisions a nationwide commitment to fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all youth in our high schools and communities. The mission of the National Alliance on the American High School is to mobilize the resources, knowledge, and capacity of individuals and organizations to work collectively in shaping policy, practice, and public engagement.

Please visit our Web site at *http://www.hsalliance.org* to learn more about The National Alliance for the American High School.

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ALL OVER THE MAP:

State Policies to Improve the High School

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Executive Summary

THIS REPORT BUILDS ON INFORMATION PREPARED FOR AND presented at the June 2001 meeting of the National Alliance on the American High School (the Alliance). At the conclusion of the meeting, it was evident that there was a need to better understand how policies affect what happens in high schools. To further that understanding, one layer of the education system—state policy—was identified for closer examination. This particular focus is important because, as so many Alliance members have learned, major changes in practice are hard to establish and even harder to sustain when state policies are inhospitable toward high school reform.

This report highlights trends, assumptions and tensions that key state education policy provisions hold for high schools. State statutes and state board requirements affecting public high schools (grades 9 through 12) were reviewed. Data were gathered from credible, well-respected sources such as the Education Commission of the States (ECS), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and others.[1] Because these organizations compiled their 50-state summaries for other purposes, at different times and using different sources, this is admittedly an imperfect first look at how state policies set the ground rules for high school. This initial examination, however, establishes a baseline from which to build a better understanding of the state context for high schools.

The state policies reviewed fell into three clusters, which serve as the organizational framework for this report. One cluster of policies is specific to high schools and deals with course credit, graduation and diplomas. The second cluster includes state policies to ensure opportunities to learn, including basic funding, help for students who are falling behind, teacher certification and options beyond the regular comprehensive high school. The third cluster of policies, more recently devised and in rapid transition, includes policies surrounding standards, assessments and accountability.

The policies specific to high school carry some unpleasant messages about how relatively unchanged high schools have remained during the past two decades. Legislation relative to high school curriculum and graduation suggest that what Ted Sizer found nearly 20 years ago still holds true today: if students show up, can pass their courses and do not cause trouble, they will graduate.[2] The most significant difference is that today, many students also have to pass a state exit exam to receive a diploma.

In the second cluster are policies intended to foster students' opportunity to learn. Policies are in place to help students who are struggling academically by improving school climate, providing remediation and creating alternative learning environments. These policies generally make little reference to the academic standards and accountability provisions that have become states' espoused central organizing features. Finance policies make some provision for the greater complexity of high schools compared to schools for younger students, but otherwise these laws are fairly uniform across grade levels.

Standards and accountability provisions, the final cluster of policies reviewed are only slightly different for high school than for middle or elementary school. The unique role that high schools should play in a state education system where all young people are expected to achieve is not defined. The long-standing laws and regulations about high school coursework and graduation detailed in the first section of this report appear to have far more influence on practice and may even conflict with the policies designed to ensure that all students will meet or exceed state standards.

State policymakers must confront the fact that, despite more than a decade of standards-based reforms, many Americans do not see "all students meeting high standards" as the real goal of high school. As a result, some students coast along on their advantages and some persevere in spite of obstacles, just as it has been for nearly 50 years. Our concern is that state policies keep the odds unbalanced with clear tracks toward early college for some, ambiguity with a GED for others, and mixed messages about what is important for the vast majority.

How can this be? Policymakers are building new systems around high standards for all students, so why not discard or revamp these old policies to reflect new priorities? One reason, of course, is that academic standards with consequences are still fairly new and the process of state policy change is often slow and circumspect. For virtually every policy in place today, there is a constituency ready to fight to keep it in place; and it is no easy matter to make widespread changes all at once. In truth, the vestiges of previous state priorities can be found in every state's codebooks and are often harmless or ignored.

In addition, high schools are weakly defined in policy because we as citizens have neither national nor even statewide agreement about what we expect of our young people or the outcomes of schooling. State constitutions, statutes and rules give varying degrees of authority and guidance to local school boards, which in turn establish and manage schools. Today's state and national policies to establish higher academic standards and accountability for results have opened a Pandora's box of new questions about and challenges to cherished traditions of local control.

State leaders should take a closer look at how their own state systems have addressed high school education. Some policies aim to tighten the links between state expectations and district or school practices, while other policies work to free schools from burdensome regulations and bureaucracy. The shadow of state vs. local control over education decisions can be seen on nearly every page of this report. There are good things going on in high schools throughout the country, innovations that are meeting the needs of a wide variety of high school-age students. Policymakers must nurture these pockets of high school innovation that may lead to higher achievement for all students. In many districts and most states,

for instance, alternatives to traditional high school education have emerged in the last two decades. Among those innovators are some of the most admirable schools in the country. They learn from one another and their growth has been steady enough that their impact is almost visible in state policy.

The 50-state surveys used to generate this report provide a unique picture of policy across the United States and a great deal of food for thought. As a next step, educators and policymakers should pay attention to the exact nature and interaction of these policies *within* each state. Underlying questions should be asked in every state regarding the policies presented here:

- Should policymakers demand more of districts and schools in some areas?
- Is the state overly prescriptive in other areas?
- Within each state's policy framework, how much autonomy do high schools need to be successful?

If bottom-up and top-down reforms need to be in sync to make and sustain progress as a whole system, then state expectations for high schools need better definition. Policymakers and educators would benefit from a better understanding of the state policies that support or thwart changes in high school practice.

Introduction

TODAY'S STATE POLICYMAKERS ARE RETHINKING SOME OF THE central regulatory features that have governed schools for more than 50 years. New standards, aggressive accountability and altogether new expectations that all students achieve at high levels are now common state policies. At the same time, state leaders are enacting policies to ensure that students have more opportunities to learn and more options in terms of where and how to learn.

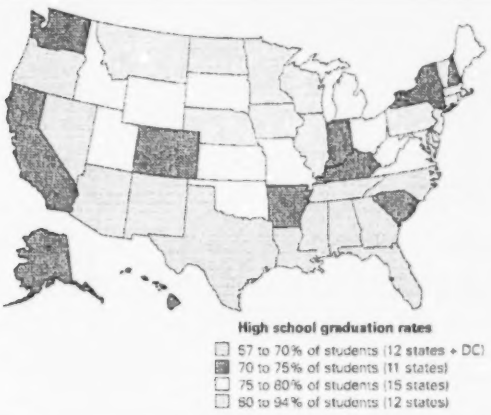
Yet, in the midst of all this policy action, the American comprehensive high school has exhibited a startling immunity to change. Most high schools today operate with the same curriculum and graduation requirements they have used for years. This stagnation bears out in the lack of evidence that high school students in grades 9–12 are making significant academic gains against new state standards. In fact, the evidence suggests that students in the United States fare less well in international and longitudinal comparisons as they move from elementary to middle to high school.

Academic gains at the elementary school level can be tentatively linked to policy action in the past decade: increased funding, more widespread preschool for the disadvantaged, new attention to reading, smaller class sizes in grades K–3, and the development of standards and accountability systems. However, few states have tackled high school policy issues so comprehensively, and the potential levers for improvement are not obvious. Understanding the existing policy context is a good place to start. This report examines one layer of the policy environment—state education policies—and how they influence high schools.

The goal of high school is, of course, to graduate students with the skills and knowledge they need to be productive citizens. Thus, as a backdrop to this presentation of state policies, it is appropriate to look at how well states do in terms of graduating students from high school.

Graduation rates are an important indicator of societal health: young people who do not receive a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated, indulge in risky behavior, and earn lower wages than their peers who complete high school (Dorn, 1996). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has estimated high school dropout rates at 27.8% for Latino students and 13% for African American students.[3] Others estimate that nearly 50% of urban students leave high school without a diploma (Greene, 2001; Balfanz et al, 2001). The graduation rates presented on the map on page 6 include only students who graduated from high school and received a diploma; they do not include those who earned a credential through an equivalency test.

Graduation rates for high school students are the result of the complex interaction among federal, state, district and local school policies and practices, along with individual decisions of the students themselves. The fact that some students are much more likely than others to drop out of high school before graduation presents a compelling policy challenge for state leaders.


High school graduation rates
57 to 70% of students (12 states + DC)
70 to 75% of students (11 states)
75 to 80% of students (15 states)
80 to 94% of students (12 states)

Data on high school graduation, completion and dropout rates are compiled and defined differently across states. One recent estimate of graduation rates found over half of the states graduate 70–80% of high school students. Using this calculation, Georgia had the lowest graduation rate; Iowa the highest.

Source: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research

States vary in how laws are passed and regulations promulgated, how funds are appropriated, and what role the state plays with regard to other layers of the education system. Despite this diversity, many provisions to regulate high schools are common across states.

This report conveys the state statutes and state board regulations, presented through maps that illustrate which states have specific laws on the books. Primary sources of this information were 50-state summaries compiled by national policy organizations, along with state codes, state education department websites, a wide array of literature and media reports, and advice from members of the National Alliance on the American High School (the Alliance). Many of the 50-state summaries were compiled or updated by staff of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) in preparation for a June 2001 meeting of the Alliance.[4] We are grateful to ECS and to the other organizations that allowed us to use this data and take full responsibility for any errors in their presentation.

When we had the option, we relied on summaries of statutes because they are in some ways more enduring—harder to adopt, more often publicly debated and harder to change—than state regulations and rules. However, we do not mean to suggest that statutes are a better policy mechanism, that everything that is important should be legislated, or even that the state level is the appropriate place to determine specific policy about some school features.

High schools across the country vary in size and structure. We looked specifically at the state policies that govern the basic comprehensive public high schools: the approximately 14,600 high schools that do not focus on vocational, special or alternative education.[5]

The report is organized around three clusters of state policies.

- The policies in the first cluster are specific to high schools, including those related to compulsory schooling ages, curriculum, special coursework and diplomas. These are mostly long-standing policies, some of which were designed when only a small proportion of students were expected to achieve at high levels or go on to higher education.
- The policies in the second cluster focus on opportunities to learn and include those related to education financing, safe non-violent schools, help for students who are falling behind academically, alternatives to the comprehensive high school, and teacher certification requirements.
- The third cluster of policies is of a more recent vintage: state standards, assessments and performance rewards or sanctions for districts, schools and students. These policies apply to elementary and middle schools as well as to high schools, are in rapid transition and have focused attention and system resources on the significant gaps in student academic achievement among schools and within schools.

Some provisions may be vestigial, remnants of earlier priorities that are no longer funded or relevant but remain on the books. Some new policies are in place, but the development of the details is still underway, so there is little or no reflection of the policy in high schools. And of course, some policies are the subject of controversy (e.g., requiring students to pass a high school exit test for graduation), and revisions, alterations and even repeal of some provisions may happen at any time.

We make no judgments about whether these policies are good or bad, useful or a hindrance to high school improvement. Indeed, it is only within a specific state's context that one can even determine the likely effect of a particular policy. Overall trends, policy assumptions and tensions are presented for each of the nearly two dozen policies reported here.

The maps are deceptively simple: we urge readers to stop and look at them closely, to note the patterns and the patchwork they represent. States are much more complicated places than the collection of policies presented here, of course, and we conclude this report with suggestions about what to look for in high school policy within a state so policymakers and educators can have a clearer picture of current conditions and areas that may need action.

Policies Specific to High School

POLICIES AT VARIOUS LEVELS OF OUR STATE EDUCATION SYSTEMS provide the details that govern high school operations such as graduation and diploma options. The direct path through high school to graduation laid by state policy is similar across the country: a student collects a determined number of credits in required courses, and when he or she meets the total credit requirements, the student receives a diploma. [See, however, the section on Assessment and High School Exit Tests required for graduation, page 31.]

Some states offer special diplomas or seals on the diploma to designate high achievement. In all states, students who drop out, who are expelled, or who do not gather the course credits required for graduation, have the option to take a high school equivalency test or General Educational Development (GED) exam. Passing the equivalency test earns students a credential that is accepted by the military, employers and postsecondary institutions.

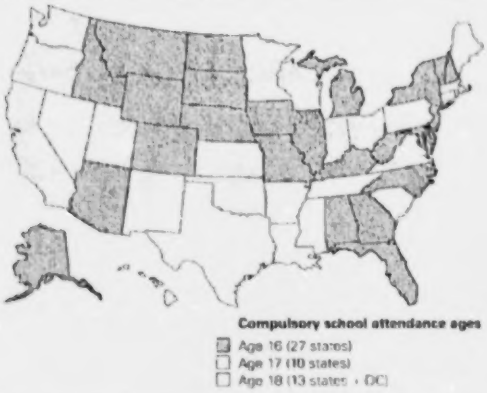
Compulsory Schooling Ages

At the turn of the twentieth century, high school education was reserved for a small proportion of young people—primarily the offspring of elite and middle-income parents. Participation in high school increased steadily in the next two decades and then again more dramatically once compulsory attendance laws emerged during the 1930s. Strengthened policies requiring school attendance after World War II helped ensure higher wages and full employment for returning servicemen.

Today, all states have policies that require students to attend school until they reach a certain age, graduate or are expelled. The U.S. courts have held that states must recognize home schooling as an option, although state regulation of home schooling varies across the country. Students who are not schooled at home and do not attend school are considered to be truant; their parents may face, fines, jail time or other sanctions such as withholding of welfare payments.

Trends

The overall trend in the past half-century has been to raise the age at which students may leave school. Compulsory schooling ages have remained fairly stable in the past decade, but concerns about high dropout rates have sparked recent policy debates on the issue in several states. Today, almost half the states require attendance until at least age 17. Proposals in Arizona and Michigan would raise the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18.



More than half of the states (27) allow students to leave school at age 16, 10 states permit students to leave at age 17; and 14 states require students to stay in school until they are 18 years old.

Source: Education Commission of the States

Policy assumptions

In states with a compulsory schooling law that ends at age 16, policymakers assume (or did when the laws were written) that for some students, finishing high school is not necessary or valuable. At the time the laws were written, a much smaller percentage of students was expected to go on to college than is the case today, and a century ago, most jobs did not require the advanced academic preparation that so many require now.

Tensions

Some states and communities offer few alternatives to the regular high school: students who are out of school but still under the age of 18 may not have many productive options to continue learning. Requiring all young people to attend school until age 18 can marginalize those who fare least well in a traditional high school setting. Some argue that forcing young people to attend school when they are unwilling disrupts the learning opportunities for others.

Carnegie Units and High School Curriculum

High school courses are developed at every level of the state education system: state agencies, regional offices, district divisions, and within high schools themselves. Some state laws spell out a grade-by-grade curriculum structure for districts, schools and teachers to use in designing instruction. Even nationally standardized textbooks and tests unofficially create a common focus for curricula. Consequently, exactly what is taught in the high school curriculum varies across states, within districts and within schools. In most comprehensive high schools, a high-level, demanding curriculum is offered alongside courses that require only the most basic of skills and knowledge.

Progress through the high school curriculum is almost universally benchmarked by a curious measure known as the Carnegie unit. The term comes from the Carnegie Corporation's 1914 role in sponsoring standardization of high school transcripts for higher education admission. A Carnegie unit is based on an agreement among states, universities and K–12 systems about the number of hours a student has studied a subject. Although not

all states use the term, virtually all have adopted the measure as the basis for a course credit: 120 hours in class, usually split up into 40–50 minute courses that meet 4 or 5 times per week, for 36–40 weeks. Students in grades 9–12 must pass the courses and accumulate a minimum number of course credits (Carnegie units) to graduate from high school.

Trends

States began to increase the number of Carnegie units required for graduation in the mid-1980s, spurred by the recommendations of the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. Additional increases in math, science and foreign language requirements continued in the 1990s. An annual survey conducted by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in 2000 reported on state course credit requirements in place.[6] The table below shows current course requirements, along with the recommendations for the "new basic skills" curriculum outlined in *A Nation at Risk*.[7] The "New Basic Curriculum" recommends that students take four years of English; three years of math; science and social studies; and a half-year of computer science, with college-bound students adding two years of a foreign language. It also suggests that students take a course in the arts.

Subject	**Math**	**Science**	**English**	**Social Studies**	**Arts**
Summary of state course credits required	26 states require between 2.5 and 4 credits	20 states require between 2.5 and	36 states require 4 credits	35 states require between 2.5 and 4 credits	25 states require at least one credit
New basic skills	3 credits	3 credits	4 credits	3 credits	1 credit

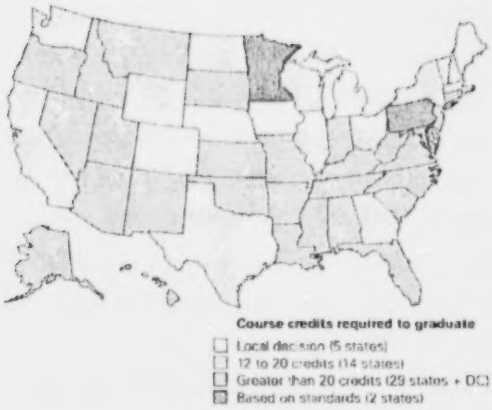
Tinkering with course requirements is almost irresistible to legislators and state board members. Recent changes in course credit requirements include: a portion of credit in math must be for algebra (CA, 2000), young people must have a half credit of civics as part of the 3-credit social studies requirement (CT, 2000), and at least two elective courses must be sequential (VA, 2001).

Policy assumptions

High school course credit requirements mirror the expectations of higher education admissions officers, and the Carnegie unit has a widely accepted meaning across secondary and postsecondary institutions. The increase in course credit requirements reflects an assumption that more courses equal a more rigorous curriculum. Some policymakers and analysts assume that a fully realized standards-based system will eventually replace today's time-based requirements.

Tensions

Some critics and analysts view the high school curriculum as incoherent and without connection to the knowledge and skills students need to know to succeed in postsecondary education and in the workplace (Powell et. al. 1985; Kirst 2001). Students often do not understand why they must take the courses required.


Course credits required to graduate
Local decision (5 states)
12 to 20 credits (14 states)
Greater than 20 credits (29 states + DC)
Based on standards (2 states)

Five states leave course credit decisions to local school districts. Fourteen states require 20 credits or fewer to graduate; most require between 20 and 24 credits. When these data were compiled, two states had established graduation requirements based on state standards.

Source: Council of Chief State School Officers

Assigning course credit based on time spent in a classroom (and getting at least a D) is a process at odds with standards-based reform, which assumes that all students will know and be able to do certain things before graduating—not that they will have spent a specific amount of time at their desks. Yet, ending reliance on the Carnegie unit would require a major shift in thinking. A student who comes into high school proficient in algebra must still take algebra to get credit that counts toward graduation. States that require a foreign language for graduation do not credit bilingual youth for their knowledge unless they take the requisite courses. Despite policy recommendations that students should be permitted to learn at their own pace, there is a pervasive unwillingness to define that pace as anything fewer than four years.

Advanced Placement Program

One source of high school curriculum that is widespread enough to have had a state policy impact is the Advanced Placement (AP) program. Created in 1955 and overseen by the College Board, the program involves a series of courses and tests that high school students can take to get simultaneous high school and college credit. (Higher education institutions decide whether to accept AP test scores for credit.)

The AP courses are generally considered to be more difficult than "regular" high school courses and thus have become a proxy for rigorous and challenging curriculum in some states. State laws provide incentives to districts and students to increase participation in the program, and a few states include AP course-taking as part of an accountability system.

Trends

AP courses are recognized by every state, and student access to the program is expanding rapidly. Some high schools offer a wide array of AP courses, while others do not offer the program at all. According to the College Board:

AP teacher training and student fees
No statute (39 states + DC)
Teacher training incentives (2 states)
Student fees for AP test subsidized (14 states)
Both training and fees supported (5 states)

Several states have statutes related to AP courses and exams, although similar provisions are more common at the state board or agency level. A few states offer financial incentives to teachers to take training to teach AP courses; other states subsidize student course fees. Five states fund both.

Four states require high schools to offer the AP courses and tests, and of those, three also offer financial incentives to districts and schools to increase participation. Eight states include AP courses in their accountability plans (e.g., as part of a school report card calculation); four of these states give local districts financial incentives to increase student participation.

AP incentives and requirements
No statute (33 states + DC)
AP courses mandated (1 state)
Financial incentives to school/district (5 states)
AP courses in state accountability plan (4 states)
Mandate + school/district $ incentive (3 states)
In accountability plan + $ incentives (4 states)

Source: Education Commission of the States

- Twenty-six states and the District of Columbia provide extra funding or have enacted policies in support of the AP program. These supports include offering scholarship money to students who score well on the AP tests (West Virginia) and allowing students to earn a "weighted grade" to increase their grade point average (Connecticut and South Carolina).
- The number of students taking the AP exams more than doubled in the past decade, from 330,080 in 1990 to 768,586 in 2000.
- In 1999–2000, 32 different AP courses and exams were offered, and about 13,000 high schools participated in the AP program.

Policy assumptions

Students who take AP courses are more likely to go on to college, and those who pass the courses and tests do better than non-AP students in higher education (Adelman, 1999). State policymakers assume that college-bound high school students benefit from the more advanced level of content and from the chance to earn higher education credit.

Tensions

The greatest tension related to the AP program is the lack of access for low-income and minority youth—especially students viewed by counselors or teachers as not college-bound. Access issues arise when AP courses are not offered in the school or are offered only to a small subset of students in a school. Competition for the AP classes can be intense, and schools and districts often limit who may enroll based on criteria such as grade point average (i.e., only students with very high grade-point averages may take AP classes and sit for the exams).

Teachers can take training to teach the AP course, but are not always required to do so. This leads to questions about the relative quality of AP instruction and whether some teachers are simply teaching to the AP test. The AP program has been criticized for its broad-brush survey course approach and the nationally standardized curriculum's lack of explicit connection to state standards. Because the AP program is designed to fit neatly into a traditional upper-level high school track and 40–50 minute schedule, and because it measures progress by a single end-of-course exam, some worry that it reinforces instructional practices that seem to be ineffective for many students.

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment programs allow students to take college courses for credit while attending high school. Usually the result of partnerships between secondary schools and community colleges, the most prevalent form of dual enrollment is to offer college-level courses taught by college-accredited high school teachers (Gehring, 2001).

The programs vary in terms of who is eligible, who pays the college tuition, and which institutions participate. The states with comprehensive programs encourage students to take postsecondary courses at no charge and at a wide range of institutions. Courses are taught in middle college high schools located on college campuses, on regular high school and college campuses and at vocational-technical schools.

Trends

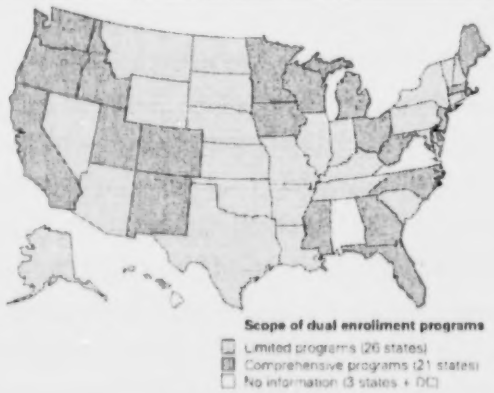
The first dual enrollment program in the United States was enacted in Minnesota in 1985. Today nearly every state offers such programs and student participation continues to grow.

Policy assumptions

Dual enrollment saves time for motivated students who are able to take freshman level college courses in their junior or senior year of high school, thus allowing them to advance more quickly into higher level college courses. Some programs aim to help students become comfortable with college life early; others are intended to encourage higher education and K–12 collaboration. Another assumption is that high school students who take college credit classes will be more able to complete college-level work and are less likely to need remediation in college.

Nearly all states provide at least limited dual enrollment programs. In 26 states there are limits to who can access the program and students may have to pay the college tuition. In the 21 states with comprehensive programs, incentives are in place to increase student and institutional participation.

Source: Education Commission of the States


Scope of dual enrollment programs
Limited programs (26 states)
Comprehensive programs (21 states)
No information (3 states + DC)

Tensions

Questions have been raised about the overlapping missions of high school and college and whether it makes sense for both to focus on the same cohort of students. Concerns about course quality, the easy transfer of credits and who should pay the college costs for dual enrollment are associated with some programs. Equal access to dual enrollment programs for students in high poverty schools is also an important issue that should be considered.

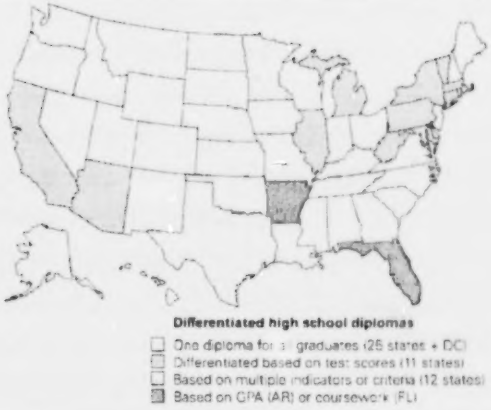
Differentiated Diplomas

Not all high school diplomas are alike. Some states offer a special diploma to students who take more rigorous coursework, achieve a high grade point average and/or post high scores on state exams. At the other end of the scale, students in some states who score poorly on required tests or who cannot meet other graduation requirements may receive a certification of high school completion or attendance. (In some states, these are only offered to special education students.)

Students who accumulate the needed course credits most often receive a regular high school diploma indicating they have met state and/or local expectations for graduation. Unlike other states, Oregon now provides a Certificate of Initial Mastery for students who meet state standards beginning in the 10th grade; students may also go on to earn a Certificate of Advanced Mastery, indicating they have higher workplace and academic skills.

Trends

The increase in the awarding of differentiated diplomas over the past two decades may be linked to policymakers' desire to ensure that students see some value in taking harder courses or putting greater effort into their test-taking. New York has long had separate courses and a diploma for those who take more rigorous courses based on college curriculum. Now those Regents' courses and exams are required for all students as part of the state's effort to increase student academic expectations. Texas offers three graduation options. The Distinguished Achievement Program, for instance, requires 24 credits in specific courses; the Minimum Graduation Plan allows students to take fewer advanced courses and graduate with 22 credits.


Differentiated high school diplomas
One diploma for all graduates (26 states + DC)
Differentiated based on test scores (11 states)
Based on multiple indicators or criteria (12 states)
Based on GPA (AR) or coursework (FL)

Fewer than half the states offer differentiated diplomas, and a dozen states use a combination of indicators to determine which students qualify for a special diploma or seal indicating higher achievement.

Source: Education Commission of the States

Policy assumptions

The assumption behind differentiated diplomas is that students will be motivated to take high-level courses, achieve at a higher level than their peers and/or do better on state assessments so they can obtain special recognition or a distinguished diploma.

Tensions

At the same time that states and districts work toward implementing higher standards for all students, by offering differential diplomas they send the message that not all students are expected to achieve to the highest levels. Those students who do not see themselves as college-bound have little incentive to seek a higher-level diploma. By establishing differentiated diplomas for college-bound and non-college-bound students, policies suggest that the skills necessary for postsecondary education are not those that are needed for the workforce. Yet, multiple reports indicate that students entering the workforce or postsecondary schools need the same skills. Differentiated diplomas encourage employers to continue minimizing the high school diploma or student achievement in high school when making hiring decisions.

General Educational Development (GED)

Another high school credential available to students who do not complete high school is offered by the General Educational Development (GED) program. Students who pass a series of five exams (English, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) are eligible for a GED credential.

The American Council on Education (ACE) GED Testing Service, which presides over the program, reports that over a half-million of the 850,000 people who took the test series in 1999 passed. Using guidelines set by ACE, state program directors determine who may take the exams (e.g., if a student must be a certain age) and set passing scores.[8] Academically, those who pass the GED achieve as well as two-thirds of high school graduates and receive a credential equivalent to a high school diploma.

Trends

The GED program was originally designed for veterans who left high school for military service. Today, 7% of all diplomas issued in the United States are GED diplomas. That percentage is continuing to grow: a total of 14.2 million American adults have earned a credential through the GED program. In January 2002, a new GED test series was put in place to better reflect state standards in the five subject areas tested. The new exams include fewer multiple-choice items and more open-ended questions that call for short written responses.

Research shows that life outcomes—wages, levels of incarceration—are somewhat better for those who pass the GED than for those who simply drop out of school, but not as good as for those who earn a regular high school diploma (Murnane and Tyler, 2000). High school data about who drops out or earns a GED is not very reliable in some states, but a 1992 change in census procedures now asks whether a high school degree was earned by completion or passing the GED, which may make better national research and analysis possible.

Policy assumptions

A high school equivalency test is necessary because Americans beyond high school age who do not have a high school diploma and foreign students whose credentials are not recognized in the United States need a way to demonstrate that they can read, write and understand basic math, science and social studies.

Tensions

The high school graduation rates reported by states and districts may be somewhat inflated when students who earn a GED are counted as having a high school diploma. African Americans and Latinos are more likely to receive a diploma through the GED than are Anglos and Asian Americans (Dorn, 1996). An apparent narrowing of the graduation gap across races in recent decades may be partially due to this alternative and not the result of improving high school graduation rates or "promoting power" as Balfanz and Legters (2001) call it.

Educators tend to question whether passing a series of tests is the equivalent of four years of high school. They fear that students will be tempted to take the shorter but perhaps less valuable route to a high school credential: drop out and get a GED.

Opportunities To Learn

HOW DO STATE POLICYMAKERS ENSURE THAT ALL STUDENTS get a fair chance to succeed? Spending more, and spending more equally are two ways to balance opportunity, and court judgments have forced some states to do both. Another significant way to support learning opportunities is to ensure that students are taught by high quality teachers.

The opportunity for students to learn also has much to do with school conditions. Students and teachers should have a safe and secure environment in which to learn and work. Opportunity to learn is also linked to availability of additional support for students who are struggling academically. When students fall behind, some states require they receive remediation. Some states prohibit social promotion so students cannot progress from grade to grade unless they have met academic expectations.

Opportunity to learn also includes the chance for students to have access to different instructional approaches. Alternative schools, magnet programs and models of comprehensive school reform have borne some stunningly effective and unique high school structures. A common lesson from these many innovations is that smaller high schools with a special purpose or focus do a better job educating diverse student populations than do large comprehensive high schools that serve a diverse student body.

Education Funding

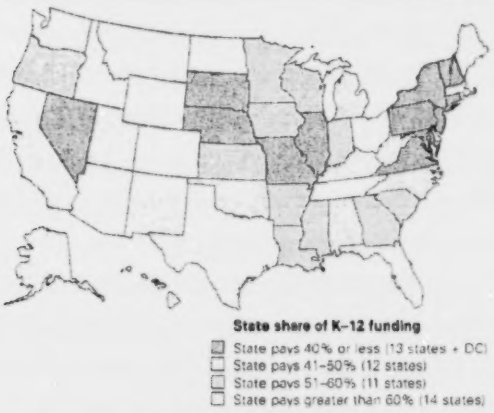
Federal education funding makes up only a small portion of school dollars. In the United States, funding education is the state's responsibility. School boards and local school districts were created to administer state education policies, to be the state's fiscal agent in providing schooling, and to reflect community priorities in those matters not directly covered by state law and regulation. As illustrated in the following maps, there is a good bit of variation in how much states pay and whether the state or local district bears the greater financial burden for schooling.

As a result of several decades of litigation and negotiation, the school finance structures that attempt to ensure statewide equity are enormously complicated. The actual *amount* of funding that goes into the school finance formula, however, is typically decided in the state legislature on an annual or biannual basis.

Trends

School finance formulas and practices have evolved over time, resulting in regional and state-by-state differences. States are currently in a decades-long expansion of funding for

schools, accompanied by much closer state scrutiny and regulation. As state budgets tighten in today's economy, the more costly elements of current programs and reforms are under scrutiny by budget-cutters. Since the early 1900s states have pressured or provided districts with incentives to consolidate, leading to larger districts and fewer, but larger high schools.

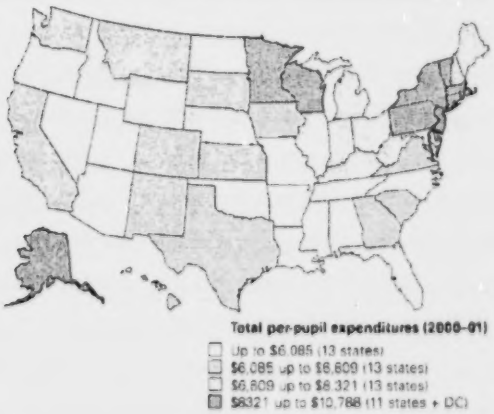

State share of K–12 funding
State pays 40% or less (13 states + DC)
State pays 41–50% (12 states)
State pays 51–60% (11 states)
State pays greater than 60% (14 states)

More than a fourth of the states pay the bulk of their state's education costs. Fourteen states pay 60% or more of education costs. An equal number of states contribute less than 40% of total funds spent on schools. Almost half of the states pay between 40% and 60%.

Source: McDowell, Early Estimates of Public Elementary and Secondary Education Statistics, 2000-2001 (NCES2001-331)

Policy assumptions

Larger high schools tend to have more specialized features (e.g., locker rooms, science labs) and are much more costly to build and maintain than elementary and middle schools. High school principals are often paid more than their peers in the lower grades because the increased size and complexity of the high school requires more complex managerial skills. High school teachers are usually paid on a standardized K–12 salary schedule that relies on coursework and years of experience as the means to higher pay.


Total per-pupil expenditures (2000–01)
Up to $6,085 (13 states)
$6,085 up to $6,609 (13 states)
$6,609 up to $8,321 (13 states)
$8321 up to $10,788 (11 states + DC)

Total local, state and federal spending on education (pre-K–12) varies across the United States, from an estimated high of $10,788 spent per pupil in New Jersey to a low of $4372 spent per pupil in Utah in 2000–2001.

Source: National Center on Education Statistics, NCES2001-331

Tensions

Some state finance formulas for school operating costs provide more money for high schools than for other levels. Funding for schools is often stated in terms of dollars available "per-pupil," with various weights attached for certain students. For instance, states give districts more money to educate students with disabilities or from low-income families than for students without special needs. There is no general rule about whether high schools should receive heavier weighting in these formulas; in some states elementary and middle schools are weighted more heavily than high schools (NCSL, 2002). Students enrolled in vocational and alternative schools and those enrolled in AP programs are examples of populations that generate extra funding for districts in some states.

State and local money does not really follow a particular student; the extra per-pupil funding for special needs provided through state formulas cannot typically be tracked to the schools or classrooms those students attend. Except for specific federal and state requirements, union contracts and court decisions, school boards may allocate money as they wish.

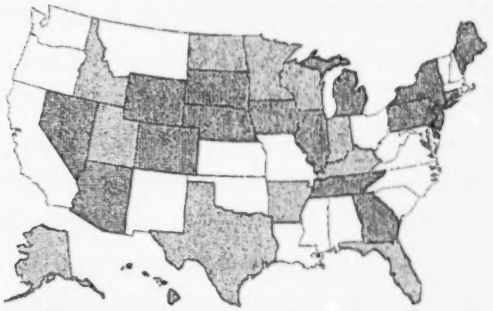
Larger, poorer districts receive more state money per-pupil (and thus are often more tightly regulated) than smaller, wealthier districts. Basic equity questions dominate legislative and legal debates on school finance (i.e., which schools and districts get the bigger slices of the existing school finance pie and why). Policymakers in some states are asking how much money is *adequate* for various groups of students rather than simply how to allocate funds *equitably* (Hansen, 2001).

Local funding for education is usually generated through property taxes, creating the funding disparities that have sparked many lawsuits. More recently, the ability of wealthier parents to raise private money for a particular public school is a growing concern, since poorer schools in other parts of the same district are unable to raise such funds. Their children, therefore, do not receive the same benefits as their wealthier peers, although they may need them more.

Teacher Certification

Studies have shown that a teacher's general academic ability and subject knowledge consistently predict student learning (Ferguson, 1991; Carlsen and Monk, 1992). Current laws for teacher certification establish a shared responsibility between the state and higher education institutions. Most states require (or ask higher education institutions to require) specific content-based coursework for an endorsement in a particular subject, although fewer than half of the states require that a prospective high school teacher have a major or minor in the subject being taught.

Prospective teachers at all levels must have a bachelor's degree and academic background in subject matter and methods of teaching. After initial certification, most states require at least modest professional development, generally expecting teachers to earn a specific number of college credit hours over a period of years.


Subject matter requirements for HS certification
No major or minor subject required (21 states)
Varies, major OR minor may be required (11 states)
Major in subject area required (18 states + DC)

Nineteen states require teacher candidates for high school certification to have a major in the subject area to be taught. In 11 states, requirements vary based on institution and/or subject area. No subject area major or minor is required for high school teachers in 21 states.

Source: NASDTEC Manual, 1998-99

Trends

Anticipating the widespread teacher shortages that have been predicted for the coming years, policymakers in some states are turning to mentoring and induction programs for new teachers rather than adding new course requirements for certification; elsewhere incoming teachers are expected to take a fifth year of training that includes a school-based internship.

Policy assumptions

Although some analysts are skeptical that state certification requirements ensure teaching quality, there is a strong assumption that requiring teachers to take more subject matter-related courses and more rigorous courses overall will lead to better-prepared teachers. State leaders generally favor tougher academic requirements for prospective teachers, but are aware that relatively low pay and the low status of the teaching profession in many parts of the country makes it hard to find qualified candidates for some grade levels and subjects.

Tensions

One recent study found that only 21% of high school students take English classes with teachers who majored in English (NCATE, 1997–2001). Except for some specific coursework before certification, state policies do not make significant distinctions between what is needed to teach high school-aged students and younger students. Nor do state policies govern teacher assignment to schools or within schools, although recruitment and induction programs are underway in some states to address concerns about the background education and experience of teachers serving in disadvantaged communities.

Schools that serve low-income and minority students tend to have more trouble filling teaching positions and as a result hire teachers who are less prepared, less likely to have majored in the subject area that they teach and less likely to be fully certified. In schools with the highest minority enrollments, students have less than a 50% chance of being taught by a math or science teacher who has a major degree in the subject.

Student Discipline and a Safe Learning Environment

Lack of student engagement in school is often blamed on a hostile peer culture toward academic achievement and/or a frightening environment that may include harassment, violence, or drug use. Students do not learn well when they are frightened or when their efforts are not supported by the school culture. Certainly they learn better when they feel safe and welcome at school.

States are beginning to insist that school faculty identify and address potentially dangerous situations before they boil over and that they not tolerate disruptive students. Some states require that students who have been removed from the school be provided with alternative learning opportunities (see also Alternative Schools and School Reform Models, on page 27). Other state policies aim to create a culture that actively supports learning.

Zero tolerance policies to punish students for behavior, weapons and drug violations are required by federal law. All states now have rules in place; 30 states enacted new discipline-related legislation between 1995 and 2001.

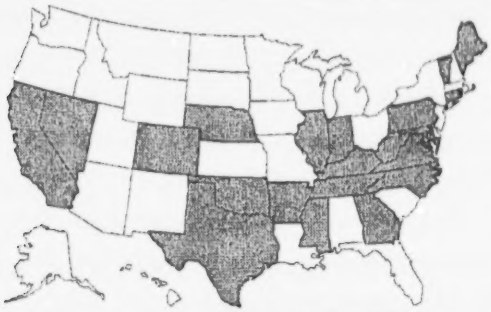
Tougher student discipline laws enacted
No new discipline laws, 1995–2000 (20 states + DC)
New discipline laws, 1995–2000 (30 states)

Source: Education Commission of the States

Trends

Student discipline policies are more explicit today than a decade ago, spelling out automatic penalties and punishments for the most dangerous student offenses, such as those related to drugs and weapons. Suspension, expulsion and other penalties are specified in state statutes for an array of student transgressions.

State policies enacted during the last five years also offer after-school services, character education programs and conflict resolution efforts to intervene in or to prevent potentially violent or disruptive situations.



Nearly half the states have put new laws on the books to require school faculty to create a safe environment and address potential violence before it can occur. Twenty-two states passed legislation of this type between 1995 and 2001.

Source: Education Commission of the States

Policy assumptions

Until recently, student discipline was left almost entirely in the hands of teachers and principals, with occasional incursions by school boards and districts. Litigation over different disciplinary standards and application of punishment led states and districts to create more system-wide policies. The widely publicized school shootings in the 1990s further sharpened state policymakers' attention on school discipline and safety issues. Policies requiring safe, non-violent schools are focused more on what schools should do toward that end, reflecting the assumption that the climate and culture of a school have a powerful effect on student learning.

Tensions

In large high schools, the potential effect of policies to improve the school climate may be muted, especially if such programs are small or are a marginalized part of the school culture. Conflict resolution programs or character education curricula will do little to alter the culture of a 3,000-student school where suspensions for misbehavior are the first line of defense for overwhelmed teachers and administrators and where only 40% of students of color ever make it to graduation. However, even if the effect is small, these policies do send the signal that it is not acceptable to simply give up on students or to allow unsafe conditions to fester.

As a result of new state legislation, some school districts have expanded the scope of state "zero tolerance" policies such that students may be suspended or expelled for even minor infractions. Students beyond the age of compulsory attendance who are suspended often opt to drop out of school completely. One study found that more than 30% of sophomores who dropped out had been suspended at least once (Skiba, 2000). Some students could more accurately be termed "pushouts" than "dropouts" when school personnel use repeated suspension or expulsion as a way to discipline students.

Some schools, districts and states have serious disparities in discipline rates across racial groups, with African American and Latino students likely to receive more severe punishment than other students. The effects are particularly devastating where there are few outside resources, alternative learning programs, or other sources of support for out-of-school youth.

Remediation/Summer School

States often require, or at least recommend, that schools offer extra academic help for those students who are struggling academically. Indeed, federal requirements in place since 1994 specify that low-income students who are not meeting state standards must be offered remediation. However, most decisions are made locally regarding who needs help, how it will be offered and how it differs from the regular instructional process.

Trends

In addition to the expectation that students who need extra help will receive it during the school day, some states provide funding for summer school and remedial courses. But summer school funding most often comes from local, federal and private sources, not state coffers. Where local districts are required to offer extra time to students who need it, states generally trust school boards to identify the best strategy for the community. In some states, such as Illinois and Nebraska, urban school districts are required to offer summer school under certain conditions.

As more states put standards and accountability into place, policymakers are beginning to consider how best to help those who have fallen behind. Arkansas policymakers, for instance, recognized the ineffectiveness of waiting until the end of the year to identify students who needed a mandatory summer school program to keep up with their peers. Legislators there repealed the summer school provision in 1999, putting in a "just in time" remediation program that can include summer school but also provides for extra help or intervention during the school year.

Fewer than half the states have policies that address remediation or summer school. Fifteen states require remediation and five require summer school for low-achieving students. Two states recommend remediation in statute, two others recommend or provide funding for districts to offer summer school.

Source: American Federation of Teachers, *Making Standards Matter 2001*

Remediation requirements and funding
Remediation not required (15 states)
Required for some subjects, not funded (19 states + DC)
Required, 1 subject funded (2 states)
Required, 2 or more subjects funded (14 states)

Policy assumptions

Policies most often suggest or require "remediation" for students who are falling behind academically, but at the high school level catching up means retaking classes for which no course credit was earned. Those students who are "below grade level" or unable to meet cut-off

scores on state tests can get extra time and attention, but it may mean forsaking other opportunities, such as extracurricular activities or elective courses, or postponing graduation.

Tensions

Trend analysis of student achievement shows that Latino and African American students from low-income families in urban communities score much lower on state and local assessments than other students. Upgrading regular instruction and climate are crucial to closing this gap, but it is also important to provide additional opportunities for these students to learn before they fall too far behind. Considering that high-quality extra time may be the only way a student can catch up, only the most qualified and skilled teachers should be hired to teach remedial and summer program.

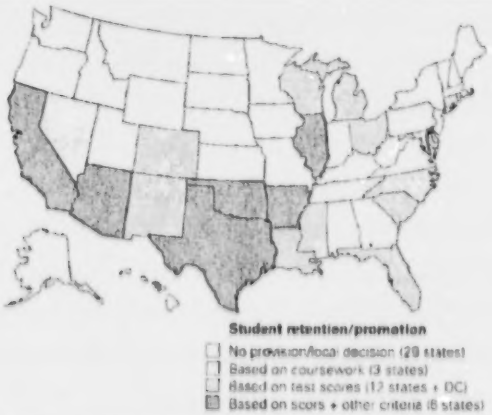
If a student fails a class the first time, it makes little sense to insist that he or she retake the exact same class. However, this is often the only option for students who have not passed a course or a required test in a core subject. For high school students, adding more instructional or remedial time is tricky, as many students work after school or during the summer, or will simply not attend even if programs are offered (MassInsight, 2002).

Student Retention/Promotion

Retention is more likely to occur in the 9th grade than at any other time in high school. After that, students can lag somewhat behind in the collection of course credits and still progress from grade to grade, although they will have to make up the credits before graduation.

Trends

There is a kind of see-saw trend to public opinion and policy inclination when it comes to questions of whether students should be held back in grade or not. For high schools, this debate is focused on the value of the high school diploma and, as noted earlier, a typical policy response is to tinker with course credit requirements.


Student retention/promotion
No provision/local decision (29 states)
Based on coursework (3 states)
Based on test scores (12 states + DC)
Based on scors + other criteria (6 states)

Nearly half the states do not address student promotion in statute. Of those that do, 13 states base the decision on test scores and 6 use tests plus other criteria. Three states rely on classroom performance or passing courses, while in 5 states the decision is left to local boards.

Source: Education Commission of the States

Policy assumptions

The term "social promotion" has negative connotations, and policymakers sometimes claim to have eliminated the practice of moving students along even if they have not mastered their studies. However, at the high school level, promotion from grade to grade is somewhat less an issue than at earlier grades. Students need the same number of course credits to graduate no matter how many years it may take to accumulate them.

Tensions

Policymakers face difficult choices when considering retention policies. It is unfair to let low-achieving students move from grade to grade or to graduate without skills and knowledge, yet the research is clear: being retained in any grade is a top predictor that a young person will drop out of high school.

Alternative Schools and School Reform Models

Another way to increase opportunity to learn is to support a variety of academic options or alternatives. These alternative schools and programs typically have a special focus and a target student population. Many, such as special schools for potential dropouts, magnet schools (which draw from across a district), middle college high schools (located on a college campus) and laboratory schools (serving as high schools as well as teacher training sites), have been in place for decades. The alternative schools are typically small, with individualized instruction and a more flexible structure than comprehensive high schools.

The term "alternative school" can be confusing because it is used to describe schools that are different from each other in purpose and operation. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines an alternative school as "[a] public elementary/secondary school that:

1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school;
2) provides nontraditional education;
3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school; or
4) falls outside of the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education."[9]

Half of the states specifically authorize districts to offer alternative schools. Alternative schools are not addressed by statute in 15 states; 9 states require districts to provide alternative schooling to students.

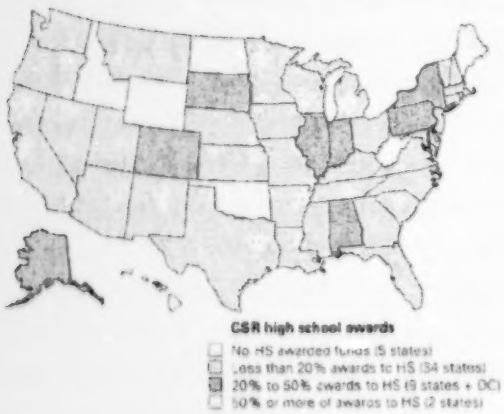
Source: Education Commission of the States

Trends

Many of today's alternative schools are part of a movement that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s to provide an option for kids who "did not fit" in the traditional system. Early alternative schools pioneered many reform ideas—small size, community involvement and service learning—that are gaining broader currency today. Some alternative schools created in the past few years are more like the old "reform schools" in that they only enroll students who have been expelled from their regular schools. These are often a student's last chance to complete high school.

Another alternative is the magnet school, very often a school-within-a-school with a special focus and clientele. Magnet schools were central to desegregation orders as school systems attempted to draw white students back into inner city schools with an attractive focus such as technology or the arts. Researcher Paul Hill termed magnets as "focus schools," that are not necessarily "innovative," but have a clear sense of their mission and often implement it very well.[10]

Small, informal networks of schools began to form around similar ideas or to implement a research-based improvement strategy in the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s, many of these networks incorporated or become bona fide nonprofit organizations to support member schools, usually with long-term help from foundations and corporate supporters. Today, their approaches and organizational structures vary, but they share a view that improvement is a whole-school issue. Federal funding accelerated efforts to help schools adopt or design and implement a school reform model, as the networks came to be called. The map below shows the percentage of Comprehensive School Reform Design (CSRD) grants made to secondary schools (vs. elementary schools) in the first two rounds of competition for comprehensive school reform demonstration project funds.


CSR high school awards
No HS awarded funds (5 states)
Less than 20% awards to HS (34 states)
20% to 50% awards to HS (9 states + DC)
50% or more of awards to HS (2 states)

Five states awarded all their CSRD funds to elementary or middle schools in the first three-year award cycle of the federal program. Thirty-four states gave less than 20% of the CSRD grants to high schools and 10 states awarded between 20% and 50% of the grants to high schools. Two states awarded half or more than half of the grants to high schools.

Source: Southeast Educational Development Lab, CSR database, 1998–2000 award cycle

Policy assumptions

State policymakers have provided support and permission for districts to operate the variety of alternative schools under the assumption that no school, no matter how comprehensive, can adequately serve everyone in a community.

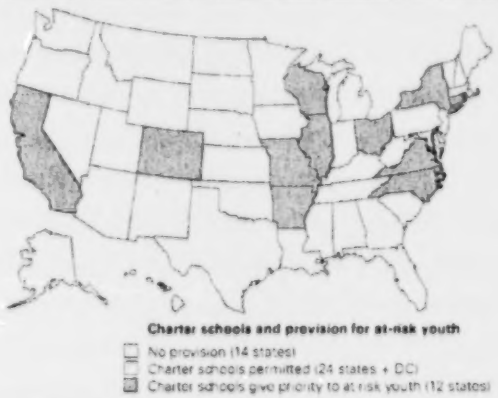
Tensions

Because of their small enrollment and limited number of faculty members (who are often more generalists than certified specialists), there are concerns about whether alternative schools can effectively serve students with special needs and whether special education processes and procedures are always followed. Some special education students may be drawn to alternative schools as a way to shed the label and make a new academic start (Ahearn, 2001).

Charter Schools

Charter schools are under contract with a local board or other entity to serve needs not otherwise being met within the school district. They are funded with public money much like regular schools, but have more latitude over personnel and programs. Some states have charter policies that give school operators much autonomy; other states require charter schools to meet the same rules as any other public school.

Most states now have charter school policies in place, although they vary in the details. For instance, in early 2001, 12 of the 37 states with charter laws gave schools intended to serve at-risk youth priority in the approval process.


Charter schools and provision for at-risk youth
No provision (14 states)
Charter schools permitted (24 states + DC)
Charter schools give priority to at-risk youth (12 states)

Source: Education Commission of the States

Trends

The charter school movement grew rapidly throughout the 1990s, in large part because its proponents believed that schools needed to be out from under the rules and constraints of usual state and district practices. The federal government reported that more than 350,000 students were enrolled in more than 1,600 charter schools across the United States in fall 1999. More recent figures indicate that more than half a million students are enrolled in more than 2,000 charters. Thirty-seven states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have passed charter schools legislation (USDOE, 2000).

States often limit the number of charter schools permitted, but put few restrictions on the types of grade level configurations allowed. The combined middle school/high school configuration is more common among charter schools than other public schools, as is the K–12 school and ungraded school.

	All Public Schools	Charter Schools	Newly Created	Pre-existing Public	Pre-existing Private
Number of schools	58,640	975	704	173	98
% of schools at each level					
Primary	6	8	8	5	12
Elementary	47	25	23	36	21
Middle	15	10	12	8	0
K–8	6	16	16	10	26
Middle-high	6	10	10	10	11
High	15	17	16	23	10
K–12	2	8	8	5	13
Other	2	5	6	2	5
Ungraded	1	2	2	2	1

Policy assumptions

Over time, educators who tried to change the structure and norms of schools noticed that within an inhospitable policy system, very few schools were able to develop and maintain a unique focus that could be sustained over time. Charter school policies assume that schools free of most strict and regulations can be more innovative.

Tensions

Charter schools create anxiety across the country because they shift power away from school boards. Some analysts express concern that funding for charter schools takes away money that would otherwise have gone to regular public schools. Others suggest that practices in charter schools are not substantially different than in the regular high school. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that there is not yet a great deal of evidence that the charter schools are effective, studies indicate that parents and students are happy with them. Early fears that charter schools pull high achieving students from regular public schools have not been well-founded.

State Standards and Accountability

WHEN MANY OF THE POLICIES IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION were set, state leaders funded and regulated education by holding local school districts accountable for providing specific services to students. New policies today tend to emphasize the results of schooling, as measured against a set of standards. The standards represent what state policymakers expect students to know and be able to do at specific points in their schooling. Standards-based reform has four overall components (IEL, 2001):

- *the standards*, usually in the form of a framework
- *the curriculum* that is taught in the classroom
- *the assessment* that is provided by the overseeing authority
- *the accountability* measures used to reward and sanction schools and teachers based on students' academic performance.

If these components are to produce a coherent and productive education system, states need fair indicators of student and school results. After state test scores, the most common indicators of results are dropout rates, student attendance, expenditures and use of resources.

States have laws to deny students who show poor academic performance access to extracurricular activities, a driver's license or a diploma. They also have sanctions for schools and districts that do not show adequate performance, ranging from exposure in the newspaper to state takeover to complete closure.

Assessment and High School Exit Tests

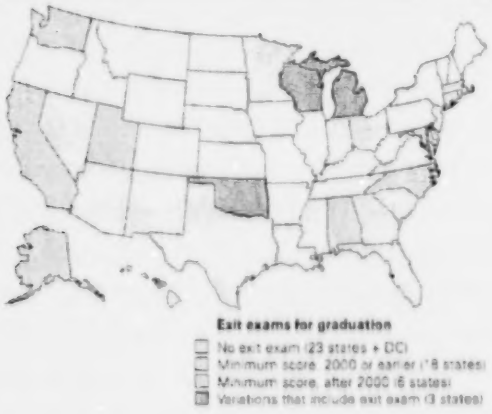
Student assessment is at the heart of how states hope to hold educators and students accountable for results. In many states high school graduation is now tied to an exit test students can begin taking in 10th or 11th grade and may continue to take until they pass.

Trends.

Requiring that students pass a high school exit exam to graduate is a policy idea initiated more than 30 years ago. Then called minimum competency testing, the first high school exit tests used primarily multiple-choice questions to measure only the most basic of skills. Years of court challenges led to more clearly defined conditions within which it was fair to withhold a diploma based on a test. For example, students must have more than one chance to pass and tests must reflect content that students were taught. Under current plans, it will not be long before a majority of states will require students to pass an exit test to receive a diploma.

Though nurtured by federal policy changes in the mid-1990s, the development of standards-based assessments is still in the early stages. In particular, high school exit tests are still more often than not a hodge-podge of assessment instruments and strategies put in place over many years and largely out of sync with state standards. One recent analysis reported that of the 30 states that base graduation or grade promotion on tests, only 16 had tests aligned with standards (AFT, 2000).

End of course testing is in place or under consideration by some states. Passing the Regent's Exams in New York, a longstanding example of such tests, is now a graduation requirement for all students. Similarly, North Carolina has instituted a series of exams for core courses that students are required to pass to receive a diploma.


Exit exams for graduation
No exit exam (23 states + DC)
Minimum score, 2000 or earlier (*8 states)
Minimum score, after 2000 (6 states)
Variations that include exit exam (3 states)

More than half of the states plan to have an exit test for high school graduation. Eighteen states put their exit test in place before 2000. When these data were compiled, 6 states intended to test students as a condition of graduation some time after the 2000–01 school year.

Source: Education Commission of the States

Policy assumptions

Exit exams emerged because schools and school districts have allowed students to graduate without a substantial attainment of knowledge and skills. Although controversy over testing is widespread and state assessment systems are in flux, many educators and policymakers believe that test results must carry consequences if they are to be taken seriously by students, especially when the adults are held accountable for student results.

Tensions

Exit tests are blamed for recent increases in the dropout rate in some states, and where exit tests are given to sophomores, some research shows that more freshmen are being retained in grade. There is no conclusive evidence yet, but as states make the transition from having no exit test or a minimum competency test, to a standards-based test with high stakes such as graduation, it will be important to track the impact on those who finish high school but fail the test and do not graduate (NRC, 2000).

Accommodations for special education students are also an issue for states with high stakes tests (Quenemoen et al, 2001). In March 2002, a federal district court ruled that California must provide special education students with any accommodation they need and are accustomed to using in class when they take the high school exit test.[11]

School and District Performance Rewards and Sanctions

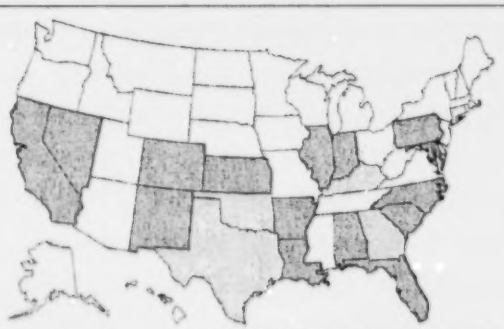
Some states' overall school accountability structures include rewarding districts and/or schools for performance. Rewards at all levels of schooling are primarily based on high or improving student test scores, although high school measures may also include dropout rate.

Money is usually the reward for increased student achievement, and the pot of funds to be distributed is often determined annually by the legislature. The process for making decisions about which schools get the reward and what they can do with it vary by state. In some states, rewards may not be used to pay staff but must be set aside for school-wide efforts; elsewhere schools may use reward funding any way they wish. A few states, such as South Carolina, have experimented with freedom from regulations as a reward for high performance.

The flip side of rewards for schools and districts are sanctions that kick in when performance is low or static. At a minimum, nearly all states now regularly release data to the public—in report cards or profiles on a school or district level—to describe progress. Public exposure when results are poor can be humiliating and considered a sanction.

Initial direct sanctions for poor performance or failure to improve typically include warnings or placement on a list of districts and schools to watch. Intervention and help steadily increase if there is no improvement, with every state employing a fairly unique balance of the two. Low-performing schools and districts must go through processes such as needs assessment, improvement planning, and accepting help from outsiders. School staff may lose their decision- making authority. Eventually schools can be entirely reconstituted (staff replaced) or closed, the principal can be fired, and/or local school board members replaced.

Fewer than half of the states provide financial rewards for school or district performance. Of those that do, 15 states provide rewards of cash to schools only; 4 states reward districts only, and 5 states reward both schools and districts.


School and district performance rewards
No provision (26 states)
School rewards only (15 states + DC)
District rewards only (4 states)
School and district rewards (5 states)

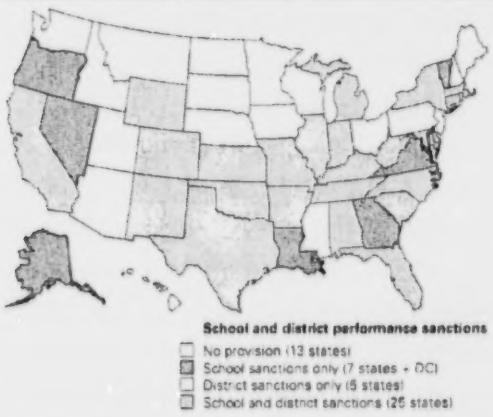
Source: Education Commission of the States

Trends

Policymakers and business leaders have long wished to establish real consequences for school systems' successes and failures, but individual rewards and sanctions proposed or enacted in the past have had little impact. Support for early performance pay plans faded away when costs exceeded perceived increases in quality, and teachers' cynicism of such plans grew when state lawmakers failed to appropriate the funds to pay for them.

Today's policies are more often linked to schools or districts rather than to individuals. Even though other parts of the new standards-based systems are developing more slowly, a wide variety of rewards and sanctions are already in place in the states.

The organizational sanction laws grew out of policies that permitted states to take over the fiscal management of school districts. Usually, those districts also had serious academic problems, but efforts to intervene in districts suffering from "academic bankruptcy" did not begin to bear fruit in most states until the 1990s. West Virginia's takeover of Logan County showed that a state can intervene, produce some academic progress and then turn control back to the district structure essentially intact. Other states have dismantled local hierarchies, improved financial systems and created efficiencies after taking over school districts, but had little success increasing student achievement.


School and district performance sanctions
No provision (13 states)
School sanctions only (7 states + DC)
District sanctions only (5 states)
School and district sanctions (25 states)

Nearly half of the states have laws in place to sanction districts and schools. Seven states intervene directly with schools, while five states only sanction districts for poor performance. Fourteen states do not have organizational sanction laws.

Source: Education Commission of the States

Policy assumptions

The assumptions are the same for both rewards and sanctions: those schools that are successfully improving student achievement should be recognized and rewarded; those doing a poor job must be identified and helped to improve. Even among policymakers who recognize the tricky nature of identifying quality among schools whose communities, values and student populations vary widely, the underlying theory of action is to put some rewards and sanctions on the books and then adjust as unintended consequences arise. Some states deliberately started the process with a focus on the basics, intending to slowly raise expectations; others began with very high standards and accepted that the early returns would not be sterling.

Tensions

Expectancy theory (Odden, 2000) suggests that to be an effective incentive, the threshold to receive an award must be achievable and the number and size of awards to be doled out must be large enough that school faculties believe they have a chance of success and success is worth the effort. A strategy to reward the top small tier of schools does not provide much motivation for any but the already-highest ranking schools. A plan to reward schools for improvement may be more motivating for all schools, especially if the size of the award is significant. In addition, if school and district rewards must compete for funding annually in the legislative process, educators are right to wonder if working toward 10-year improvement goals will pay off.

Rewards can lead to dissension among school faculty. It may be more divisive than helpful to toss a very small reward in the middle of a complex organization like a high school and expect staff to find a fair way to divvy it up. On the other hand, if done well, deciding how to use an award can be an important organizational learning activity.

In most states, the structure and processes of new accountability provisions are complex and difficult for lay people (and many educators) to understand. To move forward, administrators and teachers need help determining how performance will be calibrated and what exactly is being rewarded or sanctioned.

Rewards and sanctions based on standardized test results have become controversial as states and testing companies discover errors in scoring and/or the process of compiling results of tests with other measures. Schools have been mistakenly rewarded or placed on academic watch lists due to scoring errors. Although most such errors are caught fairly quickly, educators who will be held accountable for student performance are alarmed at the shakiness of these newly emerging accountability mechanisms.

Small schools' scores can fluctuate wildly from year to year because the sample size is too small to make state tests useful as a broad measure of school performance. Accountability technology needs a significant "trial" period, and an open discussion of changes needed. States need to be alert to perverse incentives especially in the early years of implementation.

Some observers also claim that the fallibility of the indicators being used should be enough to set aside high stakes sanctions at least temporarily. However, even if the systems are still imperfect, test data have made it harder to hide the fact that some schools and districts are doing a poor job of promoting certain students to graduation—especially special education, low-income and minority students.

Student Performance Sanctions

Beginning in the 1980s, schools began dictating that students whose grade point average dropped below a certain level were not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities. In some states, poor attendance also triggers the sanction.

Trends

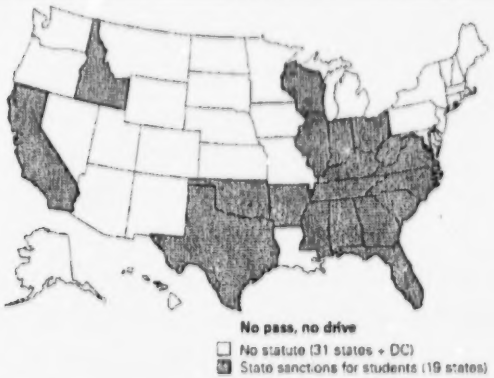
Toward the end of the decade, new state policies allowed students' driving privileges to be revoked based on poor academic performance. Schools and districts, of course, can sanction students in many ways, ranging from removing open campus privileges to detentions to retention, to even withholding a student's diploma. Policymakers in Arkansas, Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan are reconsidering their no-pass, no-play policies due to concerns that denying access to extracurricular activities is increasing dropout rates. Ohio requires a grade point average of only 1.0 to participate in before or after- school activities; Arkansas now allows students with less than the required 2.0 average to stay eligible if they accept tutoring.

Most states do not deny students access to extracurricular activities based on their academic performance, however 16 states, mostly in the southeast and southwest, bar students from sports and other extracurricular activities when school attendance or performance falter.

Source: Education Commission of the States

Policy assumptions

These policies assume that the privileges of driving and extracurricular activities, and particularly sports, will provide the incentive needed for students to attend school and keep up with their class work.



Most states do not deny students the right to drive based on students' academic or attendance problems. Nineteen states take students' driving privilege away or refuse to grant a license based on failure to attend and/or poor academic performance.

Source: Nat'l Assoc. of State Boards of Education

Tensions

Research tells us that extracurricular activities are responsible for keeping some students in school. Students who participate in extracurricular activities are also less likely to use drugs, to become teenage parents or to be arrested than are students who do not take part in extracurricular programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

OUR LOOK AT STATE POLICIES FOR HIGH SCHOOLS SUGGESTS THAT there is much work ahead. Some state policies barely distinguish high schools from other levels of schooling, and often do a poor job of spelling out the unique role that high schools should play in a state education system where all young people are expected to achieve. Nor is it always clear why some decisions are made at the state level and others are made locally. States must take a closer look at the "loose-tight coupling" of our school governance systems in the United States.[12]

In a perfect world, state policy would provide a context for system-wide improvement. Policies would make it clear which outcomes are nonnegotiable and would incorporate fair and public consequences. Policies would establish important incentives for local communities to act in support of opportunities for high school aged youth to learn and transition to work and further education. Even in our imperfect world, state policy could provide more coherent ideas about what is possible and worthy in the way of high school reform. Some examples might include:

- Do much more to ensure adequate funding to the neediest high schools and create incentives for teachers to teach in those schools.
- Take the lead in collecting and disseminating *useful* and *timely* data on school and student performance and help educators learn to use it.
- Address the unintended consequences of standards-based accountability systems and provide high-quality help for students not meeting standards.
- Provide financial assistance and legitimacy to schools attempting to break the high school mold established so long ago.
- Encourage the creation and promotion of schooling options different enough from one another to give maturing young people many ways to reach high standards.
- Acknowledge that high school needs to be more than just the end point of the K-12 system, that it must become a more effective system of bridges to communities, the world of work and an array of postsecondary schooling options.

A useful guide to future action can be found in the three priorities of the National Alliance on the American High School. In examining policies within a state and considering what needs to change, state leaders should ask:

1. Do these policies foster high achievement?

2. Do they close the achievement gap?

3. Do they promote social and personal growth among all high school age youth?

Finally, we urge policymakers to keep in mind the young people we build these schools and systems to serve: they are more sophisticated, more technologically literate and more physically mature at high school age than previous generations. As Leon Botstein says in *Jefferson's Children*, "The blunt fact is that the American high school was designed for fifteen-to-eighteen-year-olds who were children only beginning their journey to adulthood. It is now filled with young adults of the same age."[15] Policy action should start with respect for these young adults.

Endnotes

1 We are grateful to the organizations that originally compiled these data for their willingness to allow us to use their work in this analysis. Special thanks go to ECS for updating many of its existing 50-state compilations for presentation at the June 2001 Alliance meeting.

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3 The NCES used a "status" dropout rate for these estimates, a measure of how many 16- to 24-year-olds were not enrolled in and had not completed high school. Phillip Kaufman, Martha Naomi Alt, and Christopher D. Chapman, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), NCES 2002-114.

4 At that time, the Alliance was called the National Forum on the American High School.

5 Ron Wolk, unpublished proceedings document, 2001.

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11 Chapman v. California Department of Education, 36 IDELR 91 (N.D. Cal. 2002)

12 Weick, Karl. E., "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 21 (March 1976), 1–9.

13 Leon Botstein, *Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

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Selected Publications

To read more on issues and strategies that effect the academic and developmental outcomes of high school aged youth, please read the following:

- **Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution.** *http://www.principals.org/schoolimprove/breakingranks_2002.html*
- **"Every Child A Graduate."** Available on line on June 18, 2002 at: *www.all4ed.org*
- **Students Continually Learning: A Report of Presentations, Student Voices and State Actions.** Available online at: *http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/studentscontlearn.htm.*
- **Overcoming the High School Senior Slump: New Education Policies.** (2001). See *www.iel.org* for ordering information.
- **Preventing School Dropout and Ensuring Success for English Language Learners and Native American Students. (2002).** *http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/pubs/ar2000.htm*

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